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Shifting the patterns of business school space?

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Developmental Paper

Shifting the patterns of business school space?

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This is a developmental contribution. As a reviewer of the submitted abstract commented

> *"The paper touches a very important subject that has actually created recently a lot of heated debates in the British academic environment. To this extent, the topic is very important for our understanding of the space contribution to the innovation practices of the relevant organizations.*

That statement is undoubtedly correct. The authors are in the midst of exactly such a heated debate and are well aware of the competing discourses that stem from the academic and estates communities involved (leaving aside but not forgetting others). Two of us have been intermittently exploring the contrasts for over 15 years (Matzdorf and Price, 1999). The contribution is intended as a provocative discussion grounded largely, though not entirely, in previously published work. The references provide a greater context.

Tom Peters published first. In *Liberation Management* (1992) he wrote that '*In fact, space management may well be the most ignored — and most powerful —tool for inducing culture change, speeding up innovation projects, and enhancing the learning process in far-flung organizations. While we fret ceaselessly about facilities issues such as office square footage allotted to various ranks, we all but ignore the key strategic issue — the parameters of intermingling.* The statement remains true today and, despite Sundstrom (1986) or Becker (1990) space as a managerial discipline is only beginning to appear on mainstream discussions of management academe.

We are offering for discussion a comparison between a corporate HQ building that is close to the cutting edge of current practice (as indicated by other CEOs ordering one like it) and a business school in a university generally hailed as a model of efficiency in the HE estates community and associated with one of the protagonists in the above mentioned 'heated debate (e.g. Dale and Burrell, 2007).

If there is one term that arouses most heat, and triggers the memetic immune system of many academics it is probably the word open-plan; a phenomenon explored in the context of innovation by (Price, 2009). A second reviewer commented, in a statement admirably balanced compared to many reactions

> *Finally, the case for comparing a business building with an academic one may impose serious limitations to the validity of the extracted conclusions, although an appropriate justification could provide the missing element."*

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It is precisely that question that we wish to explore. Our alternative proposition will draw on parallels with the shift from 'mass' to 'lean' production where the embedded mental models (*sensu* Senge, 1990) or patterns (*sensu* Price and Shaw, 1998) of one community resisted the invasion of the other. At this point though we have to make a plea to the reader. **Please do not infer from the above an automatic defence of open plans.** Many, including business examples, are truly horrible and manipulative financial failures. The term covers a multitude of designs and, more importantly, implementation processes (Price and Fortune, 2008).

The sobriquet, or meme, of Lean [2] has now, like all successful management fashions colonised well beyond its origins and reached business school policy via the ABS response to the recently departed Lord Mandelson's pronouncements [3]. The practice of lean workplaces (Price, 2007) has not. That is despite solid empirical evidence (Price and Fortune, 2008; Price 2009) that, in certain circumstance, open-plan arrangements, and even hot, i.e. non assigned, desks can contribute to not only lower overall accommodation costs and environmental footprints but to genuine, organisation specific, improvements in business outcomes. Intent, process, language and social-construction play at least as significant a role as design in the issue of when such workplace succeed or fail. Many supposed evaluations of open plan ignore these important issues creating a climate where generalisations are rife.

To respond to another reviewers comment, viz:

> *Firstly, it is not clear whether the main focus of research is the contribution of new space arrangements to the innovative practices of the relevant organizations and/or the organizational social responsibility strategy for a greener environment. Secondly, it is not clear whether the main focus of research will be on the process of implementation a new space strategy or the impact of the new space arrangements on the selected dimension of organizational environment (or both)*

The evidence for a triple contribution, to income, cost and social responsibility is actually clear. The research question is why academe in general, and business schools as a particular example, have been slow to embrace what is, if still not common, leading edge workplace management practice in various, successful, knowledge-based organisations [4]

There are at least two reasons. The nature, traditions, and career transitions of academe all re-enforce a perception of an office (or at least a cell within a shared office) of one's own as an entitlement, and there may be circumstances where it is appropriate. Equally the successful, corporate and government examples alluded to involve a trade-off of more, high quality, common or shared access space (plus better IT provision and higher standards of upkeep). As will be shown by reference to an example they would not perform well on HEFCE standards of space management.

Contrast two buildings of similar size (Table 1). One is a recent corporate exemplar whose cost/ carbon/ staff and business benefits are well documented. It yielded a ca 33% cost and Carbon reduction per head, an increase in available billable hours, an increase in staff satisfaction, retention and recruitment and an increase in commissions and margins. We are

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[2] We make no comment on whether it is a normative managerial process or a rhetorical fashion.
[3] ABS 2010
[4] All recognisably loaded descriptors.

engaged in action research to further accelerate the buildings support for learning and innovation (Beard and Price in prep).

	XXHQ	BS1 w/o teaching
Total Net Internal Area m2	5839.53	5130.54
Workstations provided	545	383
FTE Staff supported	800	302
m2 per staff member	7.30	16.99
m2 per work station	10.71	13.40
Public space		
% Client access	20.00	7.34
Staff space		
% Informal Interaction	4.00	1.85
% Staff Meeting	6.53	1.59
% Total Meeting	10.53	3.44
% Work stations and / circulation	69.00	89.23

Table 1 Comparison of an exemplary corporate HQ and Business School that is notionally efficient on HEFCE performance measures and apparently 'full'

The implementation of the new workplace in 2006 incorporated all or most of the good practices identified by Price and Fortune (2008) (Figure 1). The other is a business school identified by comparative research (Matzdorf, 2010) and reputation in the sector as a supposedly efficient consumer of space. The corporate HQ, simply put, delivers much more from much less space just as did the original lean manufacturing plants. It did reframe a number of assumptions. For example

- The design emphasised a variety high quality shared spaces (Figure 2), some accessible to clients and some restricted to staff
- It abandoned cellular offices in favour of open desks, most of which are shared
- It reframed conversations so, for example, "I need an office for confidential conversation or concentration" became "You need space for confidential conversations or concentration" and individuals who resisted the change in 2006 now embrace their new environment.

- It is increasingly challenging the need of individuals for desks, let alone dedicated desks
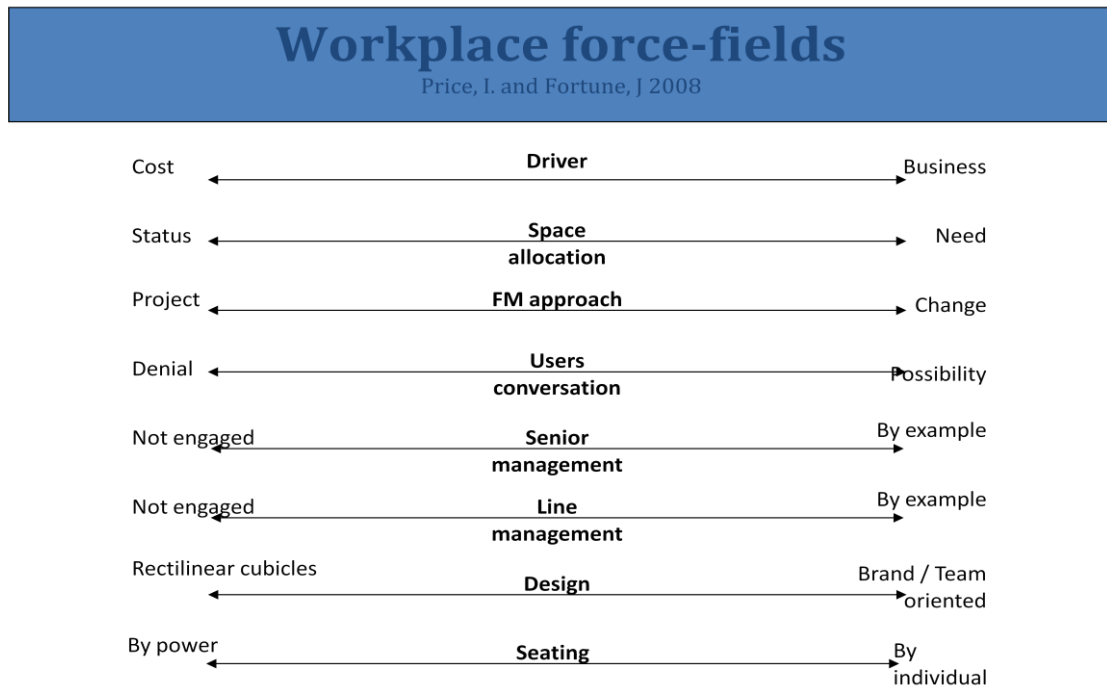

Figure 1 Price and Fortunes' Workplace force-fields model for the holistic approach to modern work space / work place practice. The space place distinction is discussed by Beard and Price (in review)
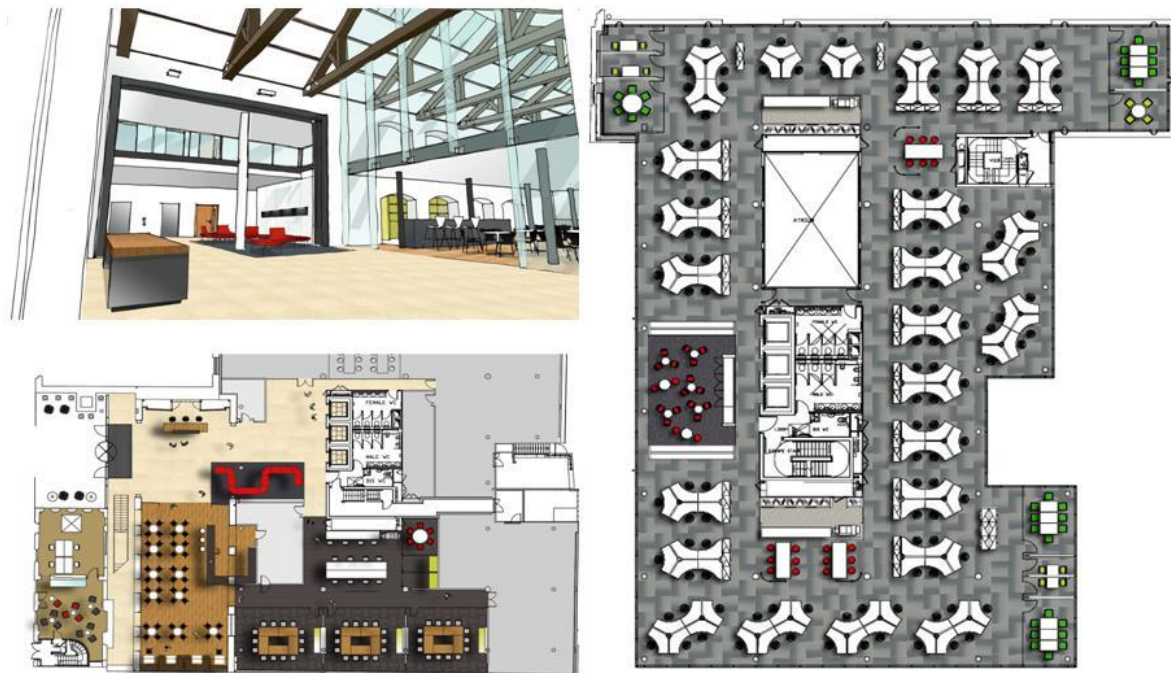

Figure 2 The concept in XXHQ. A variety of high quality, client accessible space in front. Open but unregimented desking with a variety of meeting space behind. In practice despite serving ca 50% more staff than work-stations the latter is rarely full.

In short XXHQ did, like other similar examples, abandon the traditional attitudes to space. The case illustrates the need for a different COWDUNG (Waddington, 1977) or pattern

(Price and Shaw, 1998) of arrangements for workplaces. Is modern academe really that different?

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